



FACTS-AT-A-GLANCE

California Dependency Courts

Foster Care Backgroundⁱ

- There are nearly 80,000 children in foster care in California.
- Just over half of the children in foster care have been in care for over two years.
- African-American and Native American children are more likely than children of other races to be reported for abuse, more likely to be removed from their homes, and less likely to be reunified or adopted than children of other races. African-American children constitute 7% of the state's child population, but represent more than 30 percent of the children in foster care. Native American children are .84% of the state's child population, but represent 1.41% of the children in foster care.

Dependency Court Hearings

- All children who enter or leave foster care come before a dependency court to determine if they will be removed from their home and placed in foster care, if they will reunify with their parents, and where and when they will have a permanent home.
- The case of each child in foster care is before a judge at least four times. Children in foster care for longer than a year experience at least two more appearances for each year they are in care.
- In 2004, the average time spent in a single hearing was approximately 10 to 15 minutes per case, well below recommended guidelines.ⁱⁱ
- Courts struggle to meet statutory hearing timelines: in a recent study fewer than 25% of cases completed the jurisdictional hearing within 15 days of the detention hearing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Judges, Attorneys, and Caseloads

- There are only 132 full and part-time judicial officers presiding over California's entire dependency court system.^{iv}
- The average caseload per full-time dependency judicial officer is approximately 1,000.^v
- Many judicial officers serve a relatively short period in dependency court. The median length of service for judges is 2.8 years.^{vi}
- Nearly 75% of judicial officers have prior professional experience in juvenile matters, usually as attorneys in juvenile court.^{vii}
- Attorney caseloads in California counties range from a low of 131 to a high of 616.^{viii} The average caseload statewide is 273, far exceeding the recommended 188 clients per attorney. The optimal caseload is 76.^{ix}

Court Programs and Facilities

- Several state programs assist children and families through the court process.
 - ✓ About 10% of the children in foster care have a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) who provides critical information about a specific child to a judge, enhancing the decision-making process.^x
 - ✓ Courts in 22 counties have juvenile dependency mediation programs that help resolve contested issues in a non-adversarial way.^{xi}

- ✓ There are dependency drug courts in 26 counties to assist substance abusing parents in reunifying and/or maintaining custody of their children at home.^{xii}
- Most California dependency courts do not have a designated place where children and families can meet with their attorneys or wait for their hearings.

Sources:

- i www.cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports
- ii *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, June 2005 (does not include trials).*
- iii *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, June 2005*
- iv <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/pdffiles/Delinq-ResUpdJO2006.pdf>
- v *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007*
- vi <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/pdffiles/Delinq-ResUpdJO2006.pdf>
- vii *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families*
- viii *Dependency Counsel Caseload Study and Service Delivery Model Analysis, June 2004, prepared for the Administrative Office of the Courts, by The American Humane Association, Denver, Colorado, the Spangenberg Group, West Newton, Massachusetts.*
- ix *Dependency Representation, Administration, Funding, and Training (DRAFT) Pilot Program, Administrative office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, October 2007 report to the Judicial Council.*
- x *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*
- xi *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*
- xii *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*